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"I Won't Back Down?" Complexity and Courage in Federal Decision-Making
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"I WON'T BACK DOWN"?:

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U.S. FEDERAL EXECUTIVE DECISION-MAKING

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Senior government executives make many decisions, and not-infrequently these are difficult. By "difficult" decisions, the literature generally means ones characterized by complicated and uncertain information, and hard tradeoffs among conflicting value objectives (George 1980; Janis 1982; Nutt 1989), such as decisions to launch the Bay of Pigs invasion or the run-up to the Cuban missile crisis.

Making good decisions is challenging. Cognitive limitations preclude individuals from making fully value-maximizing choices, and cognitive biases can also reduce decision quality. It has been suggested that, done properly, decision-making in groups can compensate for individual-level limitations. However, both the literature on "groupthink" and lab research have highlighted ways group decision-making can fail to live up to its potential. Out of this literature has emerged a paradigm for more-effective group decision-making -- what Janis (1989) calls "vigilant problem-solving" -- that enlists the group to provide the decision-maker more complete (and diverse) information, and thus encourage a fuller, less-biased consideration of alternatives.

For this paper, we interviewed twenty heads of subcabinet-level organizations in the U.S. federal government during the Obama administration, asking each the same questions about elements of how they made important decisions. Ten were nominated by "good-government" experts as ones who had done an outstanding job improving their organization's performance. Ten were chosen at random from a listing of all federal subcabinet-equivalent positions. Our research question was straightforward: to see whether there were significant differences in how members of those two groups made decisions, specifically, to what extent members of the two groups used a "vigilant" problem-solving process.

Some of what we found surprised us, however. Asked to discuss their "most-difficult" decision, most executives – and all ten of the outstanding ones – identified decisions that were not informationally complex but instead mainly required courage to make. In this context, a vigilant problem-solving paradigm might be more problematic than the literature suggests. The title of the Tom Petty song states,

"I Won't Back Down." Is Petty's declaration a good approach for executives when making decisions? Most literature suggests good decision-makers should seek out multiple sources of input, listen to different views, and be prepared to revise assumptions based on new information. However, where courage is central, such an approach may be counterproductive. In such cases, the leader needs personal character, then perhaps bolstered by the kind of resolve provided by advisors who offer support rather than more, and oft-conflicting, information. We thus explore both our original research question and complications emerging from our empirical results.

THEORY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The enormous literature on individual decision-making, starting with March and Simon's Organizations (1958; see also Braybrooke and Lindblom 1970), notes that to make a "rational" (value-maximizing) decision, one would need to list all alternative strategies, determine all consequences of the alternatives, and comparatively evaluate these in light of one's values. As critiques have repeatedly emphasized, it is impossible fully to realize this ideal because of the data-gathering and analysis burdens it implies. Literature on cognitive biases (e.g., Kahneman 2011; Bazerman and Moore 2012; Gino 2012) has added a new set of concerns about challenges to good decision-making, including overconfidence in estimates about factual states of the world, as well as confirmation bias, which suggests that initial impressions "are remarkably perseverant and unresponsive to new input, even when such input logically negates the original basis for the impressions" (Ross et al. 1975: 880; see also Lord et al. 1979).[1]

Group Decision-Making

A separate literature deals with group decision-making. Kahneman (2011: 418) is optimistic about the potential for organizations to make better decisions than individuals: "[A]n organization is a

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[1] There is also a literature arguing too many choices can produce "choice overload" (Iyengar and Lepper 2000). A meta-analysis of studies, however, showed no main effect for more choices (Scheibehenne et al. 2010). Also, dependent variables in these studies were generally the motivation to choose or satisfaction with the choice rather than choice quality.

factory that manufactures judgments and decisions. Every factory must have ways to ensure the quality of its products in the initial design, in fabrication, and in final inspections." Given individual cognitive limitations and biases, moving from individual to group decision-making has the potential to improve decisions. A diverse team can provide multiple sources of information that may be richer than information any one person has (Jehn at al 1999), as well as counteracting individual biases, because different group members bring different biases to the table (Kahneman 2011). Statistical principles guarantee that judgments formed by averaging several sources have lower random error than the individual sources on which the averages are based, a phenomenon often now called the "wisdom of crowds" (Yaniv 2004). Additionally, diverse group members can provide differing opinions for discussion; although the evidence is mixed (Lorge at al 1958; Gigone and Hastie 1997), in some situations such deliberation produces better results than simple wisdom of crowds aggregation. If one removes extreme words such as "all" that make the classic model into a straw man, it may, then, well be feasible to employ a group decision-making process that involves what Janis (1989: 206) calls "judicious information search and analysis" -- building a team characterized by deliberate diversity of knowledge and opinion, solicitation of dissenting views, willingness to consider new information challenging initial assumptions, and examination of costs and risks of the preferred choice.

However, much of the literature on group decision-making, particularly at the top of government, emphasizes pathologies. The best known is Janis' work (1982; 1989; see also George 1974) on "groupthink" – a phenomenon where leaders stifle dissent and members conform, producing inadequate, biased information and consideration of alternatives. The enemy is too much agreement. The prescription is "more is better" – more information search, discussion, and opportunities to hear dissent.

The existence of pressures to conform to a group majority is one of the best-established findings in social psychology (Nemeth and Staw 1989), first investigated in the classic Asch (1963) experiment

where many subjects gave an incorrect answer about which of three lines was longer than the others after experimental confederates unanimously gave an incorrect answer. The basic way to reduce conformity pressures is to introduce minority voices. Some of the main prescriptive recommendations in Janis or George involve consciously bringing dissenting voices into the process. Research (Nemeth 1986; Wood et al. 1994) shows even when minority views don't convert the majority, their expression often leads a group to give greater thought to the issue, which in turn can produce better decisions that are different from both the majority's and minority's initial viewpoints.

Groupthink partly arrives from conformity pressures on group members, and partly from leader style. Simple leader power encourages deference -- in a field experiment among Navy crew members with three hierarchical levels (Torrance 1959), a group was less-likely to accept the (correct) view of a lower-ranked person than the same view expressed by a higher-ranked one. Burris (2012) found in a lab context that superiors tend to downgrade the performance ratings of subordinates presenting (correct) information to the group that ran counter to the leader's views. Janis (1982: 263) recommends leaders "should be impartial instead of stating preferences…at the outset"; Stern and Sundelius (1997: 138) recommend leaders "take pains to encourage timid or lower-status members to participate." Janis also recommends that leaders force the discussion to go an extra round after the group has appeared to reach consensus. Maier and Solem (1952; see also Flowers 1977) found in the lab that where only one member of the group had the right answer, 76% of groups gave the right answer where the leader who encouraged all members to express an opinion, while only 36% with an inactive leader did so.

In this regard, one of the most important sources of information for senior leaders is the career civil service. There is a large literature in public administration and political science on relations between senior career civil servants and political executives (e.g., Heclo 1977; Light 1987; Aberbach and Rockman 2000). Seen from the perspective of this discussion, those relationships bear on diversity

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in decision-making: one source of diverse knowledge and opinions for top government executives, especially political ones, is career civil servants, because long-term, "inside" career people bring a different perspective from short-term outsiders. As Aberbach and Rockman (2000: 91) note:

> There is a sort of yin and yang in government between dynamism and ballast. Politicians tend to provide the dynamics and bureaucrats the ballast. Leadership, drive, and vision are essential to government, but continuity, connections to the past, and an appreciation of policy practicality and political feasibility are equally important.

Many practitioner guides for political appointees (e.g., Ferrara and Ross 2005; Abramson et al. 2008) note the tensions between political appointees and career civil servants, and emphasize the importance of appointees listening to careerists. The consensus in the literature (e.g., Aberbach and Rockman 2000) is that after getting off to a rocky start, relationships tend to become better over time.

Research Questions

There is some evidence vigilant information-gathering is associated with better decisions. A careful reanalysis of Janis' cases (Tetlock et al. 1992) – where independent analysts blind to the study hypotheses read available accounts of each event and used a common template to classify elements of the process – found a positive relationship between process and outcome. The strongest discriminators included acceptability of dissent and sensitivity to other points of view. A meta-analysis (Orlitsky and Hirakowa 2001) of mostly lab studies of group process and decision quality found all process features theorized to be associated with good outcomes to be positively correlated with decision quality.

A study (Herek et al. 1987) of decision-making in 19 international crises found high-quality processes were feasible -- in 42% of crises, the process displayed either none or only one of the seven features of defective decision-making Janis had identified, while another 16% displayed only two. However, there is little research on the quality of decision-making processes in the normal operations of federal agencies at the leader level. Thus, the main research question we originally sought to examine is to what extent the decision-making processes of senior U.S. federal subcabinet executive outside

foreign-policy correspond to the ideal of vigilant problem-solving. We also wanted to examine whether outstanding executives used better decision-making processes than controls – suggesting one reason they had\ been successful is that they use better decision-making processes. As noted, some of the findings from our interviews caused us to explore a topic we originally did not intend to examine.

DATA AND METHODS

The Sample

For this study, we interviewed both a group of "outstanding executives" and a control group for comparison.

To locate outstanding executives, we solicited nominations from experts on the U.S. federal government. We approached fellows of the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), a congressionally chartered honorary association designed to be like the National Academy of Science, but for distinguished scholars and practitioners studying or working in government (N=677), and the Strategic Advisors to Government Executives (SAGE's) of the Partnership for Public Service, a group of former senior management officials in the federal government in the areas of information technology, contracting, financial management, and human resources (N=74). Second, we approached a smaller group of very senior current government officials with a government-wide view ("luminaries") -- Office of Management and Budget (OMB) program associate directors and management directors, Government Accountability Office (GAO) experts; senior committee staff of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, former members of Congress, and a journalist (N=16).

Systematic investigation of factors promoting success for government executives is difficult. For starters, defining success is harder compared to business firms/private entities, where measures such as relative share price, market share, or profitability are available. This difficulty exists even when we can

specify the executive's goals and where there are ways to measure success in achieving each one. Take veterans' hospitals. An executive might seek both to reduce emergency-room heart-attack death rates and average postoperative length of stay for hip surgery. However, even in this situation, one cannot create a scalar variable measuring success, analogous to stock price for firms, without subjective judgments about relative weights to give the different goals. This becomes even more difficult, and subjective, where more than one agency is involved, and creating a scalar variable would require subjective judgments comparing the value of the goal of reducing length of stay at a veterans hospital with the goal of, say, achieving outstanding customer service on a Medicare telephone help line. In addition to their subjective nature, judgments about success using goals and changes in performance measures are resource intensive, eating up much of the resources available to the researcher just to choose observations for study.

Gathering systematic data about practices associated with success is also challenging. Such data do not exist in data sets of the kind economists typically use. It is essentially impossible to get executives to respond to closed-ended surveys. A common view among public management scholars (Moore 1995) is that contextual and interaction effects are so important that, for rigorous analysis, sample sizes must become prohibitively large.

Faced with these difficulties, much of the best-known research in this area has declared methodological defeat. Probably the two most influential works on practices associated with executive success are Moore's Creating Public Value (1995) and Doig and Hargrove's Leadership and Innovation (1990). Moore discusses cases but gives no account of how executives were chosen or the basis for declaring them to have been successful. Doig and Hargrove also use cases and note (p. 5) that "we did not make our selections in any rigorous way," using their own judgments combined with those of an informal "advisory group" of 11 scholars. Furthermore, much existing work—such as Doig and

Hargrove (see also Borins, 1998)—is so-called "best practices" research drawing conclusions based only on successful cases. However, this creates the problem of selection on the dependent variable (Lynn, 1996). If one chooses only successful leaders, and finds they did A and B, one cannot conclude that A and B caused success because others who were not successful (about whom one has no information) may also have done A and B.

We recognize that our "reputational" approach is not perfect (see Wolfinger 1960 for a critique of its use in community power studies), but we believe that it is better than other feasible alternatives.

Potential nominators received a letter from us stating inter alia:

> We are asking for your help in identifying senior-level subcabinet executives who have served in the Obama Administration, and whose performance in managing and leading their organization has been outstanding. We are focusing in the first instance on individuals at the assistant secretary level, but these executives may also have titles such as Administrator, Commissioner, or Director. They could also be executives who are in charge of running a program or agency, as well as executives with cross-cutting management responsibilities (such as CXO's). …

> You may define "outstanding performance" as you feel appropriate, but we ask you to think about executives who have made a significant contribution to improved results delivered by their organization, without regard to whether you personally agree or disagree with the executive's substantive policy agenda.

Nominations were received from 38 individual NAPA fellows/SAGE's, who provided a total of 93 nominations. All 16 luminaries eventually replied, providing 107 nominations. We determined that a nominee would become part of our outstanding executives based on one of these criteria: 1) two or more nominations from both the NAPA/SAGE group and the luminaries; 2) three or more nominations came from the luminaries, independent of NAPA/SAGE nominations; or 3) three or more nominations came from the NAPA/SAGE group, along with one luminary nomination. Based on these criteria, 11 executives qualified. However, one of those was eliminated since that person was in charge of an organization that was not of significant size and had a very small operating budget.

To select the control group, we used the so-called "Plum Book" (U.S. Government Policy and Supporting Positions 2008), and took positions with the titles Assistant Secretary, Undersecretary, Administrator, Director, and department-level (but not subcabinet) Chief Financial Officers, Chief Information Officers, and Chief Human Capital Officers.[2] We also excluded positions responsible for an operating budget smaller than the smallest budget of any outstanding executives. (N=388)[3]

We selected the control group using a random number generator. However, the ten outstanding executives included a disproportionate number of CFO's and CIO's (four in total), so we split the control group selection process into two separate random drawings, one for CFO's and CIO's meeting our criteria from the Plum Book, the other from everybody else. Four individuals selected for the control group declined to participate in the study, so four others were selected using same procedure.

None of those in either group worked in foreign policy, the empirical location of most earlier studies of high-level decision-making in the U.S. federal government. Of the ten outstanding executives, two came to their positions from the career civil service; of the controls, five did so. Thus, where appropriate – for instance in analyzing questions about relations between executives and civil servants -- we will analyze results for executives who are themselves politicals and career civil servants separately.

The Survey

Our interviews were conducted during the last year of the first and the first year of the second Obama term. Each respondent was interviewed in person, and interviews recorded and then transcribed afterwards. Interviews followed a standard format, with mostly open-ended questions. These were:

1) Who are the individuals inside or outside this organization on whom you most rely for advice or information about decisions you need to make?
2) What are the most important sources of information you use other than people you talk with to help you make decisions?

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[2] We included occupants of these three positions in the military branches due to their large operating budgets

[3] We excluded assistant secretaries for Legislative and/or Public Affairs and general counsels.

3) Please think about the single <u>most-difficult</u> major decision you have made on this job. What was the decision? Why was it difficult? How did you go about making the decision?

4) Can you think of any situations where <u>information you learned</u> while you were deciding what course of action to take changed your mind about what you should do in that situation?

5) Can you think of any situations where information you learned <u>after you had decided on a course of action, and were executing that course of action,</u> significantly changed your approach to you should going forward? (IF YES) Describe what happened?

6) Are there any specific steps you take to increase the diversity of points of view you hear on important decisions you need to make?

We also asked some questions specifically about relations with civil servants:

1) Are there any examples of important initiatives you have begun that were originally proposed to you by career staff?

2) Have you had any problems with situations where senior career staff has been disloyal to you?

In addition, we asked several closed-ended questions on decision-making style[4] and relations with civil servants (see Appendix), as well as about the size and composition of the respondent's personal staff and direct reports; and the size of their "top management team" (Guadalupe et al. 2013).[5]

<u>Coding</u>

The lead author developed an initial list of coding categories based on themes identified through a preliminary reading of half the interviews. Codes were embedded in category families, corresponding to themes addressed in the survey questions. The entire research team then reviewed and revised these categories and definitions to reach consensus about the meaning of each code.

Transcript coding was performed by the lead and the most-junior authors, with the latter assisted (in the case of questions or clarifications) by the second author and a colleague, both serving as subject-

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[4] For one of the outstanding executives, there were special circumstances (that we cannot disclose without revealing the respondent's identity) that led us to discard the respondent's answers for the decision-making questions.

[5] By "direct reports" we meant people who themselves run a unit inside the respondent's organization – e.g. (to take an agency not in our sample), the Office of Foods in the Food and Drug Administration. By "personal staff" (front office) we meant individual professionals working for the respondent, e.g. a chief of staff. In asking about the "top management team," we defined this as "the group with whom the executive normally meets to discuss important topics and make decisions" (and asked the respondent to "distinguish this from show-and-tell regular reporting meetings that may involve a larger group").

matter experts, and another junior colleague. The three researchers performed the coding with guidance, when necessary, from the subject matter experts. We used Atlas.ti Version 7.1.3.

We performed a first IRR test on two transcripts. Kappa scores (*k*) were .44, .42, and .54 for decision-making, relations with civil servants, and leadership competency topic areas respectively. A *k* of .40 to .75 is considered to represent fair to good agreement (Landis and Koch 1977). We had a very large number of codes (96, 14, and 14 respectively), and the general rule of thumb is that IRR tends to decline with number of codes (Sim and Wright 2005). To increase agreement, we had several discussions on results of the first test, reviewing each coded quote and discussing the meaning of each code. Based on a consensus from these discussions, we revised the code list and performed a second IRR test on one transcript, obtaining higher *k* scores of .60, .57, and .70.[6] Having concluded that *k* scores were satisfactory, the senior and junior authors proceeded to code remaining transcripts (the senior author coded 11, the junior one 6, consulting as necessary with a subject-matter expert). Some code reassignment took place when the senior author was analyzing the coded quotes.

Strengths and Limitations of our Data

The results we present are suggestive only. One limitation of our study is the limited sample size, too small to give statistical analysis of our data much chance. As a practical matter, it is infeasible (without enormous resources) to get survey or interview-type data for large N samples of top leaders – they will not respond to survey research instruments used for the mass public (responses that do come to such surveys are from staffers). As is common in qualitative research, we sacrificed breadth for depth, with in-person interviews averaging over three hours. We would argue that, compared to much qualitative research, our method is more disciplined. Our standard set of questions allows counting and comparison. And respondents were chosen in a systematic way.

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[6] The junior author was instructed to lean on the side of "over-coding," since unnecessary codes could be ignored when the senior author was analyzing the data based on coding. Many of the "disagreements" involved situations where the junior author gave a code and the senior one left the quotation blank.

The second limitation is we did not observe actual decision-making processes, which would have probably been infeasible and at a minimum extremely resource-intensive. We relied instead on respondent accounts. We suspect it is socially desirable to claim one gathers a wide range of information, encourages diversity of viewpoints, or is open to changing one's mind. We sought to reduce social desirability bias by asking for examples or specific facts, rather than relying on general statements. So, for example, we didn't ask, "Do you often change your mind before making a decision" but instead asked respondents to discuss examples of situations where they did so.

Some of our findings – regarding "vigilant" decision processes – may be seen as providing field evidence outside a foreign-policy decision context for propositions developed either in the lab or only in studying foreign-policy decision-making. Findings about most-difficult decisions, which we came upon unexpectedly during the research, may be seen as reflective of the tradition of the best qualitative research as helping with theory-generation more than theory-testing (Edmondson and McManus 2007).

RESULTS

With some notable exceptions, which we will discuss, we notice more similarities than differences in responses of outstanding executives and controls. In many ways, there seems to be a style of decision-making common to senior federal executives.

Information Sources for Decision-Making

Table One lists categories of people respondents consulted. These were broadly similar for the two groups – the most common were direct reports, hierarchical superiors, peers in the larger department, and personal staff.[7] The total number of categories consulted was very similar between the two groups, an executive consulting on average 3.4 different categories. If anything, there is evidence some outstanding executives may consult less broadly than controls. Of ten outstanding executives, two

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[7] By "peers within the department" we mean people at the same level as the respondent but in a different part of the department, e.g., for a Chief Financial Officer, the assistant secretaries of department line organizations . By "peers outside the organization inside government" we mean executives in other agencies with similar jobs, e.g., for a Chief Financial Officer other chief financial officers. By "external advisors" we mean a former occupant of a senior government position similar to theirs or an individual at an outside group (rather than the group as a whole) relevant to the organization the respondent led..

began their answer stating they didn't consult much. ("I don't really spend a lot of time consulting people" and "I guess there are fewer and fewer people you rely on when your job is like this."[8])

We were somewhat surprised by the domination of direct reports, mentioned by seven both outstanding executives and controls.[9] Respondents made fewer references to political sources outside the organization (Congress or OMB) than we thought they would, and almost none to outside old friends. On reflection, though, perhaps these results should not be so surprising – on an ongoing basis, an executive develops a top management team, and others are likely to be more-occasional advisers.

A fair number of respondents -- more controls than outstanding executives -- reported using external advisors. One control noted:

> There might be some of those that I trust in a given area of expertise, whether it's [leaders of private organizations affected by the organization's decisions], but it could be senior leaders in state government. You know, whether it's the state secretary of [the organization's policy area] or a chief of staff for a governor, you know, those that are involved in the [policy area] broadly would be those that I might have for information.

An outstanding executive stated:

> I would use, on a confidential basis, a network of advisers I had. So, a couple of CEO's of big companies, who I'm close with, when I was trying to make a decision. I might ask, "Am I driving change too fast? Some people are getting uncomfortable, but I want to move it." I mean, just general or strategy issues.

To our surprise, only one respondent (an outstanding executive) mentioned seeking advice from old personal friends from before they started the job: "If it was something political happening, I would talk with some people I knew from the outside, who were just very good, who would look out for mine and the agency's interests in confidence." More generally, controls were somewhat more-likely to consult

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[8] One control began the answer as follows: "I have to say, I begin with myself. I have a core set of values."
[9] One of the ten outstanding executives had a matrixed authority that meant the respondent didn't really have direct reports.

people outside their organization – 12 such sources cited by controls, eight by outstanding executives. But outstanding executives were somewhat more-likely to consult a hierarchical superior.[10]

Five controls, asked whom they consulted, started by noting those consulted varied for different kinds of questions (two outstanding executives). We are hesitant to draw any conclusions from this, but perhaps it weakly and tentatively suggests the outstanding executives are more likely to have a stable team to whom they regularly turn for a wide range of decisions. An extreme example of not having a stable group being consulted was the one executive in the control group[11] who stated that when they needed to make a difficult decision they send out a sort of all-points bulletin to the staff:

> It's very common when I have a decision in front of me to ask advice from many or all of them or, in some cases, some of them. I don't have any reservations about going out and saying, "Look, here's something that's in front of me. It's going to affect all of you. Tell me what you think."

For these executives, then, it is not lonely at the top. However, although part of seeking a wide range of information and opinions involves having a larger circle rather than a narrow coterie, large groups are not necessarily diverse. It's difficult to be sure from the interview materials how diverse are the approaches that those the leader consults. However, we make two observations. One is that direct reports are diverse. Some specifically mentioned heads of legal, press, and congressional affairs offices; many others run bureaus dealing with substantive questions the organization faces.

We also have other data we believe sheds light on the question of diversity among those consulted -- the percentage of the executive's personal staff and of direct reports who are careerists as opposed to politicals. If politicals and careerists bring different perspectives, to the extent executives are regularly exposed to both groups, one may assume diversity of inputs at least on this important dimension. However, there has been worry that the growth of political appointees among the personal

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[10] The external sources were peers from other government agencies, external advisors, Congress, and OMB. Many of those discussing external sources noted that this occurred on a sporadic basis, depending on the decision, while those discussing consulting superiors were more likely to say this occurred regularly for a wide range of decisions.

[11] This response was not counted among the five saying "it depends on the decision," because the respondent didn't use an expression such as that.

staff and direct reports of chief executives may be cutting out this source of diversity. "It may be

increasingly the case that the two worlds of politicals and careerists never collide at all, because the two

groups move through separate space with little or no opportunity for contact" (Light 1987: 157).

We do not find this. We asked respondents how many professionals were on their personal staff

and how many direct reports they had, then how many of these were careerists. For respondents who

were themselves politicals, the mean percentage of personal staff who were careerists was 77%, for

direct reports, it was 78%.[12] (Career people dominate among those consulted, which provides diversity

since the executives themselves are (mostly) political. This is an important source of diverse views for

leaders. We also asked respondents how many of their direct reports were still the same people as in the

position when they started the job, on the view that holdovers were likely to be a greater source of

diversity than people executives selected themselves. For all executives who were political, the mean

was 39%, for all who were career 55%. So for the politicals, only about one-third of their direct reports

stayed on; subjectively, this strikes us as a bit low from a diversity encouragement perspective.

In response to a closed-ended question (see Appendix), the mean value for both groups was to

prefer when decisions were being made to "bring in representatives of people in the organization with

different points of view" rather than limiting the discussion to "my most-trusted staff," though there is

reason to worry about a social desirability bias on the answer to this question. The mean value for

outstanding executives (7.2 on a ten-point scale) was somewhat higher than for controls (5.8).

Table Two presents answers to our question about information sources other than individuals.

Every respondent cited at least one such source. Here, though, there was a noticeable difference between

outstanding executives and controls, with the former citing noticeably more such sources (2.6 vs. 1.5).

This difference was accounted for by greater use of written information (15 vs. 8) and outside

experts/academics (4 vs. 1). Two outstanding executives specifically noted they tried to get information

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[12] We include only respondents who were politicals because for respondents who themselves were careerists, all these subordinates were careerists.

about private-sector management practices, one tried to learn how to manage better from "academic institutions, professors and writings," a fourth tried to learn about management from lectures by experts.

We also note that in parts of the interview not specifically dealing with decision-making, six respondents (three outstanding executives, three controls) made one or more spontaneous references to their decision-making philosophy as "data-driven."[13] Respondents (the first two outstanding executives, the third a control) discussed their preference for more data as follows:

> When decisions were coming at me, it wasn't just chitchatting, "What do you think, what do you think?" It was, "What's the data?" And I'd often send people back, and I'd often drive the data. …[Staff would say], "We want to do this. We want to shift a major program here." I would then look at that and say, "Well, give me this piece of data, this piece of data. …And so we wouldn't just take data input. We'd also kind of drive a decision to make it much more analytical, frankly, than it showed up on my desk at times. … We called this kind of "moving the whole agency to being data-centric."

> I'd tell people, "I cannot go to the Secretary and make a recommendation based on what you just told me." And then oftentimes you'll get information…[where I would] say, "That's interesting. I don't know what it's telling me. …What are you telling me about is it gonna be faster, better, cheaper, smarter? I don't know based on what you've given me."

> So, my aspiration for this organization is to be data-driven. Emotion plays in for a part, but to the extent practical I want to have strong data that supports these refinements in the way that we do things.

Top Management Team Size and Free Riding in Groups

It is tempting to adopt a "more is better" attitude to the number of people in an executive's decision-making group, on the view additional people add more diversity of opinion and information.[14] However, the larger a group becomes, the greater the danger of free riding, producing less information; a meta-analysis of studies on brainstorming (Mullen et al. 1991) shows that, despite its popularity, in fact more ideas are generated by asking individuals privately to generate ideas than by bringing them together for brainstorming. Research (Hackman 1998) concludes the optimal size of decision-making groups is 5-6; smaller ones are insufficiently diverse, larger ones marred by too much free riding. The

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[13] Three outstanding executives and one control also used, in all cases more than once, the words "rigor" or "rigorous" in describing the process they went through to make decisions.

[14] Prescriptions for reducing groupthink do not suggest increasing group size per se, except for bringing outside ad hoc experts into deliberations.

mean size of these leaders' top management teams was seven for outstanding executives, 6.6 for

controls. Six outstanding executives had top-management teams with five or six members; four controls

had four to six, suggesting their size is closer to optimal than in large private firms.[15]

Getting diverse opinions

There was a question in the survey about specific steps the respondent took to encourage hearing

diverse opinions. But in some sense more remarkable than the answers to that specific question was the

fact that a remarkably large number of respondents in both groups (7 outstanding executives, 6 controls)

spontaneously made some kind of observation about efforts to increase the diversity of opinions in some

part of the interview other than where the question about this topic was asked.

> For example, from the outstanding executives:

> If I want the best people, I got to get out of groupthink. I'm not going to get the best
> answers if everybody comes from the same background, everybody has the same culture.
> So I'm not into this as a group-hug thing. I'm just pragmatic. The more diverse my
> organization, the more creative it tends to be.

> I don't want a lot of people around me that are going to tell me what I want to hear. I
> don't need that. I don't think it leads to good decision-making.

> I often say to (my staff), "Tell me what you really think. Candor is welcome." That's one
> of my favorite phrases. I really try to form kind of a trust zone, so a lot of times if I'm
> running a meeting, and it's a very sensitive issue, I'll say, "Look, guys. Everything we're
> going to say stays in this room. You don't have to worry about it. It's not for attribution."
> Because I want people to speak their minds, right? A lot of times -- and I don't think this
> is just government -- people are intimidated or they feel like they can't speak out because
> their boss is there. …

Members of the control group expressed similar views:

> When we set up our strategic plan, I actually put some people (on the team) I knew were
> dissenters, because they'd written me all through my three years here about how much
> they disagree. So I do try to make sure that I have somebody with a different point of
> view in the meeting and to hear them out.

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[15] Guadalupe et al. (2013) found the mean size of top-management teams in Fortune 500 firms (defined as the number of direct reports to the CEO) in 2005 was 10, double 20 years earlier. The mean number of direct reports for our executives was 7.8, not radically different from the numbers for the private-sector executives; the government organizations our executives ran are considerably smaller than Fortune 500 companies, but the private-sector evidence is that beyond a medium size organization, there is little connection between organization size and number of direct reports. (The Guadalupe et al. paper does not discuss direct reports as decision advisors, and attributes their increasing number to increasing efforts by companies to centralize functions such as IT.)

I already know what my view is, right? I don't want a bunch of folks to simply be yes-men. What I want is I want that diversity of thought. And the reason I bring my decision I hired a young lady to lead [an] effort for me. [When] my assistant called her, she said, "He wants to talk to me? Did I do something wrong?" My assistant said, "No, I think he wants to hire you." She says, "But he doesn't like me. He always argues with me when we're in the meetings," right? And my assistant says, "Oh, no, you don't understand him. He likes people who challenge his thinking because it informs his ultimate decisions." So, that's sort of my makeup, right? I don't think I know all the answers to everything

Every respondent was able to give at least one example of a technique used to encourage diverse opinions. However, outstanding executives mentioned a larger number of techniques – 1.6 per respondent versus 1.1 for controls. We list below techniques respondents mentioned in order of the total number of mentions. Respondents mentioned both techniques to increase the variety of voices present and to encourage those at the table to speak up:[16]

(1) <u>Reaching out to lower-level employees for opinions</u>:

> [I have] folks [from the field] in every meeting, they're seeing every decision. If we walk out of a meeting, I'm saying, "How's that going to play in your facility? What's the impact going to be?" And really getting feedback from that It's amazing how the people that actually have to implement your policies day in, day out…don't see it the same way that you do at the high-level policy level.

> I try to involve people at all levels of the organization. …I will tell you, I once had a boss that told me one time they were challenged with an issue. And there was a guy in picking up the trash. And while they were all sort of stuck because they were all sort of the same background and makeup, the kid who was picking up the trash said, "Excuse me, but that's not hard. Have you guys tried doing this?" And it was the right answer, right? …And I tell my team this all the time. I've got a situation right now where a valued…line employee is on a key committee that advises me on one of our major information technology projects. This particular person isn't an IT person, but she's the customer for the project. So I want her on this team. ... I will not permit blockage of the viewpoint of our line employees. That's the way you keep yourself grounded in what's going on.

(2) <u>Specifically encouraging people to speak up, in groups or one-on-one meetings</u>:[17]

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[16] The techniques significantly track, and in some cases add to, those recommended by Janis and others. Nobody mentioned enlisting a "devil's advocate," and there were few references to bringing in outsiders to a discussion; one respondent (a control), mentioned seeking the opinion of outside constituency groups as a way to encourage diversity.

[17] Two outstanding executives (no controls) specifically mentioned that sometimes this needed to be done one-on-one, separate from larger meetings.

I put everybody at the table, I want to know what their opinions are. And I go out of my way to ask them. … It has to be, "I need to hear from you. I want to be informed. We don't always agree. But it's then a more informed decision."

If we have a meeting, and two people are sitting there and haven't said anything all meeting, they don't get the luxury of getting out of the room that way. I will say, "Okay, Mary, what do you think about what you have just heard? What did we not think about? …You're sitting there thinking, "God, I can't believe they're going to do this.'" I mean, just trying to draw people out.

As I was walking out, I said to someone, "Wow, I thought that was a really good meeting." The person said, "Why?" And I said, "Well, because when I was making that point about this thing, I wasn't getting any kind of opposition, so I figure there's a lot of support for that." And he said, "Oh, no, around here, if people disagree with you, they don't say anything." …So what you have to do is figure out ways that you can kind of break through and give people some safe space. I think, in big groups in particular, until people get to know you, senior career civil servants are not willing to give their opinion. The group dynamic doesn't encourage that. And that's why I'm often having the one-one-one. And in fact, senior career civil servants will always do this within a month of you getting here. …[That way you can] be able to open a dialogue that isn't necessarily exposing them to a group dynamic.

(3) <u>One last chance to speak</u>:

I try very hard to see if we can go another round of, you know, dragging people in or asking people to participate.

Then at the end [of the discussion] I have my most trusted folks, and I say, "Here's what I heard. Here's where I think I'm going. This is kind of the last effort. Do you see me missing something here? Or do you see it really differently? I'm two minutes from making this decision, and I want to allow my most trusted folks to get their last input in there and then go forward."

(4) <u>Holding own opinion until others speak</u>:

First and foremost is I hold back. I tend to lean to making up my mind quickly. …But, you know, as a leader, I can't really express what I'm thinking the conclusion is or it pollutes the whole discussion.

If you walk in the room and say, "Look, I know there's different views on this. Right now, I'm agnostic, okay? I want the best solution, whatever that is." It's really disarming, right? Because then everybody feels a little more free to make their points Well, I mean, the problem is, is if you come in there, and you've already got your mind made up, and you show it, then people are not going to feel like why put themselves on a limb when they know they're going to be cut off, right?

(5) <u>Voting:</u>

[Occasionally], just to make sure I get candid, heartfelt input, I have the senior team do yes or no vote on secret ballot, I was the only one who looked at results –so knew exactly where people stood.

(6) Miscellaneous:

I like to throw hand grenades into the room -- a really outrageous statement. So, when I first got here, I knew that [one of our major programs] was going to consume my time. So one of the first things I said is, "We'll just abolish [it]." I sometimes find, you have to say things that are so outrageously off of what that are accepted things, just to get them to move a dime and think about things.

Changing Course During Decision-Making or Execution

One behavioral indicator of a leader's willingness to listen to different opinions – and overcome confirmation bias –is how often they change their minds in response to new information or views. So we asked respondents if they could recall examples of changing course. One surprising result was that seven outstanding executives—though only three controls—spontaneously stated, though the question was not phrased to elicit such a general response, was that changing course is not unusual. For example, one outstanding executive stated "It happens not all the time, but it happens regularly, and this, to me, is a fundamental tenet of leadership is, as new information comes in, we got to be prepared to change course." Another stated, "Change is going to happen, and you'd better be making decisions that accommodate the fact that you're going to get new information." One member of the control group stated, "You have to sometimes be willing to even back up a step or two in order to go forward again. But if you continue to chase that decision out of just pride or belief that you can get it done at any cost, it's often going to lead you to a failure."

All ten outstanding executives were able to describe at least one specific example of changing course when making a decision and during execution. (Three controls couldn't recall an example of changing course during execution; one -- one of these three -- also couldn't recall an example of changing a decision.) By far the most common reason cited for doing so was getting new information – eight outstanding executives and four controls noted this for initial decisions; for changing course during

execution, six outstanding executives and six controls also discussed receiving new information. Three outstanding executives and two controls noted specifically the influence of quantitative data.[18] For example, one outstanding executive stated, "We got much better economic data and were able to run much more robust analysis that showed us that the difference between [two thresholds for applying a regulation] were actually minimal. … So the analysis really took us in a pretty different direction." It is, however, noteworthy that nobody stated they changed course because of a new opinion they had heard.

One outstanding executive and two controls stated they changed during execution in response to stakeholder opposition to the original decision: "Regarding [one regulation], as they rolled the program out, they got feedback from regulatory offices, who were closer to the ground, and I learned it had unintended consequences. Then we pulled back what we launched." In addition, three outstanding executives (no controls) stated they changed course after concluding the initial decision was impractical.

Relations with Civil Servants

Career civil servants can be an important source of information and input for subcabinet officials—indeed, that is their institutional role—so we also examined relations between the decision-makers in our sample and their career staffs. Our survey included both two open-ended questions about this topic and a series of closed-ended ones. Overall mean values on the closed-ended questions (Table Three) support findings in other research that, several years into an administration at any rate, executives are positive towards senior civil servants.[19]

However, we have some evidence outstanding executives who were politicals were less strong in their enthusiasm than controls who were politicals. [20] Though there was no difference between these outstanding executives and controls in views on whether civil servants provided them good information,

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[18] One outstanding executive, in discussing two different examples, referred in one instance to new substantive information and in another to new quantitative data. This respondent has been coded under both categories.

[19] We developed ourselves all the questions except the one about loyally carrying out administration priorities, which we took from Aberbach and Rockman (2000: 123) In that sample, 71% of political executives agreed strongly or somewhat with the statement, compared with 90% of our respondents.

[20] We see in Table Three that executives who were themselves civil servants (two of the 10 outstanding executives, 5 of ten controls) were generally noticeably less sanguine about other civil servants than were either group of political executives. This is an interesting finding, which may merit further investigation, but is not directly relevant to our research questions.

outstanding executives were noticeably less-likely to believe civil servants were candid in their opinions or sufficiently willing to change. In an open-ended question asking respondents about "leadership competencies" they believed important for government executives, three controls mentioned an ability to develop good relations with civil servants, while only one outstanding executive did so.

To our question about examples of important initiatives careerists initiated, every respondent was able to give at least one. This speaks favorably to openness to diverse inputs. But controls were more-likely to say getting ideas from civil servants happened all the time: five controls (only two outstanding executives) gave some version of that response. "I could go on for an hour on the number of examples that the career staff have done," said one.

We also asked a question about situations where a civil servant had been "disloyal." Seven outstanding executives stated they had experienced such disloyalty, five controls. Examples of disloyalty cited included going outside the organization (Congress or the media) to oppose the respondent's course of action, obvious passive resistance to a course of action, or acting in a disruptive way inside the organization. An outstanding executive who stated he had experienced disloyalty noted:

> I have got a very solid team here, right? There is no doubt that some of the things that I'm trying to drive are very upsetting to [some], not because it's not the right thing to do, but it's moving their cheese. It's all the classic problems you run into, right? There are people that are, no doubt, trying to wait me out. If they wait long, if they push back hard enough, then they don't have to move, they don't have to do these things, somehow it'll just go away. I hope that's naive thinking on their part, but I do see that. And if you want to call that being disloyal, maybe that's a fair point.

Also, while the mean response on the two closed-ended questions whether civil servants were loyal[21] on average expressed strong agreement, outstanding executives were less-likely to believe this, especially whether civil servants would support a decision contrary to their views.

Changing Course During Decision-Making or Execution

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[21] See Appendix and Table Three. The numbers here are only for respondents who were political appointees.

One behavioral indicator of a leader's willingness to listen to different opinions – and overcome confirmation bias –is how often they change their minds in response to new information or views. We asked respondents if they could recall examples of changing course. Seven outstanding executives— (only three controls) spontaneously stated, though the question was not phrased to elicit such a general response, that changing course is not unusual. For example, one stated "It happens regularly, and this, to me, is a fundamental tenet of leadership is -- as new information comes in, we got to be prepared to change course." Another: "Change is going to happen, and you'd better be making decisions that accommodate that you're going to get new information." One control stated, "You have to sometimes be willing to back up a step or two to go forward again. But if you continue to chase that decision out of just pride or belief that you can get it done at any cost, it's often going to lead you to failure."

All ten outstanding executives were able to describe at least one specific example of changing course when making a decision and during execution. (Three controls couldn't recall an example of changing course during execution; one -- one of these three -- also couldn't recall an example of changing a decision.) By far the most common reason cited for doing so was getting new information – eight outstanding executives and four controls noted this for initial decisions; for changing course during execution, six outstanding executives and six controls also discussed receiving new information. Three outstanding executives and two controls noted specifically the influence of quantitative data.[22] For example, one outstanding executive stated, "We got much better economic data and were able to run much more robust analysis that showed us that the difference between [two thresholds for applying a regulation] were actually minimal. … So the analysis really took us in a pretty different direction." It is, however, noteworthy that nobody stated they changed course because of a new opinion they had heard.

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[22] One outstanding executive, in discussing two different examples, referred in one instance to new substantive information and in another to new quantitative data. This respondent has been coded under both categories.

One outstanding executive and two controls stated they changed during execution in response to stakeholder opposition to the original decision: "Regarding [one regulation], as they rolled the program out, they got feedback from regulatory offices, who were closer to the ground, and I learned it had unintended consequences. Then we pulled back what we launched." In addition, three outstanding executives (no controls) stated they changed course after concluding the initial decision was impractical.

 "The most-difficult decision"

We expected respondents, when answering our question about their "most-difficult" decision, to present ones -- in line with discussions in the literature of what makes decisions difficult -- that were informationally, technically, or politically complex. However, this wasn't what we found (Table Four). When we asked why the decision was so difficult, no outstanding executive (and only four controls) answered this was because it was complex in these ways.[23] Instead, respondents stated the decision was difficult because it was very unpopular within the organization (often among those whose ox would be gored) or among external stakeholders,[24] or because it involved emotionally wrenching issues regarding employees. These included decisions to eliminate or expand programs, reassign (or remove) senior career staff, challenge the Government Accountability Office or the Office of Management and Budget, and even oppose a directive from higher headquarters that an official felt would severely hurt the organization's ability to do its job.[25] The executives generally did not regard it as difficult to decide what the right thing to do was (though of course others might disagree with the executive's determination). What made the decisions so difficult for them was that going ahead and deciding actually to do what they regarded as the right thing required courage (Hannah et al. 2011 use the phrase "moral courage"). In all these cases, the executive chose the decision they regarded as painful but right.

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[23] In their narrative of the decision, one outstanding executive (and two controls), emphasized features of the decision that were informationally complex for decisions where they did not state this was the main reason the decision was so difficult.

[24] These decisions were not presented as being "controversial" in the sense that there were strong advocates on both sides, the way "difficult" decisions are often discussed in the literature. It was more the decision-maker against the world.

[25] Decisions we classified as difficult because they involved complicated information or tradeoffs included ones involving characteristics of major IT systems and a policy decision requiring trading off the overall agency mission and the specific responsibilities of the organization the respondent headed.

The government was in the middle of budget-crisis land and continuing resolutions and the beginning of the campaign at that time, and OMB simply did not want to support us in getting moving on [the important problem the organization needed to solve] an anomaly from the continuing resolution and to get treated differently so that we could begin spending money we needed to [deal with the problem]. … So I had to make the decision, do I just eat this or do I hope for the best? You always have a choice. And not fighting is actually not that hard of a choice in government because there's so little actual accountability. So at the end of the day, on all of these things, I've had to just say, "All right, I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to go do it." (outstanding executive)

Sometimes what you have to do is as clear as day, but the implementation is going to be difficult. … If you start to care more about what people think about you than your job, you're going to start compromising your decisions. And as soon as you start doing that, you start having to spend a lot of time thinking, because if the question isn't, "Is it the right thing to do?" then why the hell are we doing it? "Well, there's a political consequence to it," they say. Well, I'm going, "Yeah, guess what. That's life." (outstanding executive)

We decided to stop 45 programs. What was difficult about that is it's the caliber of hard decision that has a huge impact on an agency. I'm asking my Cabinet Secretary boss I'd been working for for exactly thirty days to trust me on this one. …I'm not wading into the pool. I'm going to belly-smacker this thing, and it's either going to work really well or it's going to be really bad. (outstanding executive)

So [persisting with strict requirements for implementation of an Administration initiative that might slow the program up] is something we had to do from a public-policy standpoint. And yet we've got this tremendous pressure to get the money out the door, and so, ultimately, I had to make a decision that we weren't going to yield on the requirement, that doing the right thing long-term was more important to the long-term viability of the program. (control)

[The program] was something the advocates had advocated for a very long time. … I spent a year and a half working trying to implement this. ...I finally concluded [the program could not be made to work]. But this was exceedingly difficult because of the expectations of the advocates, because of the connection with the [an Administration priority program. …The people who were opposing the [Administration] were pleased with the decision. The supporters of the President and Democrats in Congress were disappointed. So it was very stressful and a very difficult decision. …[But] I've been in public service for two decades. And I was not willing to implement a public program I believe is flawed. (control)

The importance of courage for many of these decisions doesn't mean no information-gathering was involved for some of them. However, only four of the outstanding executives (seven controls) reported gathering information for the decision from lower-level staff, consultants, or, in the case of two

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controls, gathering the information themselves through reading documents. Only a <u>very</u> modest number

of respondents (two outstanding executives, one control) made any reference to gaining information

through discussions with their top management team. And six outstanding executives (no controls)

essentially made the decision by themselves, with no real informational input or advice.

> Some of those gathering data reported as follows:

> One day I simply asked the team, "Hey, what is [this program] really going to do for us? Is it going to get rid of the significant deficiencies?"…And they came back with an assessment that was less than impressive for something that was going to cost a half a billion dollars.

> We looked at it every way we could. We just couldn't figure out how you made the program successful, right? So we had to take the political hit and explain. …Well, there were certainly a lot of people that thought we should continue, but in the end, I mean, it was my call because the leader of that organization was looking to me to make that recommendation, right? I mean, and I think we just had to tell people, "Look. Why continue on something that we have no way how we're handling it?"

<u>Decisiveness and a "Bias for Action"</u>

A closed-ended question (see Appendix) asked respondents whether they leaned towards

exhaustive information gathering even at the risk of "paralysis by analysis" or towards decisiveness in

decision-making even at the risk of not having enough information. Interestingly, both outstanding

executives and controls leaned towards the right side of this scale. However, outstanding executives

were more inclined to favor decisiveness than controls, with a mean value of 6.8 (vs. 5.7 for controls). [26]

Furthermore, four outstanding executives (but no controls) mentioned a preference for avoiding

paralysis by analysis in comments during the interview, outside of our question.[27]

> I've seen way too many organizations where procrastination on decisions causes a lot more impact than even a bad decision. You know, there is an old adage out there that even a bad decision well-executed is better than no decision. You know, I have a responsibility on my team to be the person that accepts risk and makes the decisions that let the team move forward. .. I would prefer to make a decision and let the team move forward rather than say, "Well, let's move this to committee and think about it again."

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[26] For political appointees only, differences were actually more-dramatic (6.8 vs. 5.0), so this was not driven by a larger number of politicals among outstanding executives.

[27] No respondent spontaneously advocated the opposite, being sure to have all the facts before making a decision.

I had breakfast with Colin Powell once. He's got a military view of this, which is, senior-level executives should decide what decisions they need to make and put a timeframe on it, because you don't want to make it late. And when they get 30% of the information, they should start formulating a decision. And when they get to 70%, they should make it. Your intuition and judgment will take care of any diminishing return. And one of the big mistakes you see all over [our agency] is people need to have 99% accuracy.

But I don't stay up at night worrying about decisions. If you got the information and you know this is the right thing to do… We have a failure rate. But part of it because we're trying stuff nobody else would be willing to try. I think, probably it's the fear of failure that paralyzes people.

Finally, in our open-ended question about leadership competencies, four outstanding executives (only one control) named "decisiveness" as an important competency. (This was separate from the spontaneous answers just discussed.) Two outstanding executives both made a spontaneous comment and also listed this as a leadership competency, so in total six outstanding executives (one control), discussed the importance of decisiveness and acting without full information.

As a leader, you have got to have a bias to act. When faced with ambiguous circumstances, when you're presented with, I'll call them, excuses to do nothing, you've got to fight that off. … And especially in the government, there are a thousand reasons to do nothing. But you know what? Progress never happened by doing nothing. … Frequently what you'll be presented with is one or more reasons not to act and one or more reasons to act. And that's why I always say, "When in equipoise, move forward. Act in the face of ambiguity." Unless there's a really good reason not to act, act.

We need people that can make decisions, that can gather input and make crisp, clear decisions, because a lot of times in government you're not getting clear decision-making.

DISCUSSION

Many responses to our questions eliciting information about the extent to which these leaders use vigilant problem-solving practices are similar, and to us suggest a reasonably high level of diversity of information inputs these executives consider. (1) Both groups had quite a large number of types of people from whom executives got advice, suggesting wide consultation. Those most-heavily relied on were direct reports; that a large majority of both direct reports and personal staff were career civil servants is an important indication executives are receiving information from people who tend to have

different perspectives based on different kinds of experiences. (2) The size of the typical top management team was close to the optimal size recommended in the literature on team information-gathering. (3) Both groups often spontaneously mentioned the importance of hearing diverse opinions, in parts of the interview not dealing with this issue; furthermore, all could state at least one measure they took to encourage diversity. (4) Almost all respondents were able to cite at least one example of a situation where they had changed their minds from an original course.

There were also differences between outstanding executives and controls, though we are hesitant to over-interpret them. Compared to controls, outstanding executives seem more likely to: (1) "bring in representatives of people in the organization with different points of view" rather than limiting to "my most-trusted staff" when making important decisions; (2) consult written sources to gain information for decisions; (3) say they change course about decisions or during decision execution "all the time" (also, some controls, but no outstanding executives, cannot recall ever having done so); (4) cite a larger number of techniques they use to encourage dissent; (5) worry about the loyalty of career employees and the candor with which they express their opinions; (6) regularly consult the same people for important decisions, or not consult widely at all;[28] (6) prefer decisive decision-making "even at the risk of making the decision without enough information" to getting "a great deal of information even at the risk of 'paralysis by analysis.'" The first four differences fairly conventionally correspond to the view more information gathering and encouragement of dissent produce better decisions, so executives who do these more are more-likely to be successful. However, the others don't really seem to fit into that paradigm, an issue to which we now turn.

The "Most-Difficult" Decision

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[28] Note that evidence for these statements is particularly weak and the conclusion particularly speculative. Some outstanding executives (two of ten) did state they did not consult widely, and some controls (three of ten) did volunteer the people they consulted varied by the decision. Controls were also noticeably more likely to consult with external people, such as Congress and external advisors, which is likely to occur more on a case-by-case basis and also involve consulting people not in the room when decisions are being discussed.

We found interesting differences between outstanding executives and controls regarding their "most difficult" decisions, both how they defined them and how they made them. Outstanding executives characterized the hardest decisions they made not as ones characterized by complexity but as ones requiring courage. We do not mean the alternative was between the right thing and something immoral or unlawful. Rather, the alternative to doing the courageous thing would have been to do nothing, to just let an unsatisfactory condition persist.

What is required to make hard decisions that require courage? First, they are about the executive's own character. Since they are often not informationally complex, they require introspection more than information. This shaped how many outstanding executives approached these decisions— essentially by themselves, without much consultation with or information-gathering from others.

What, then, is the role of advisors? The help leaders may need is staying determined to make a tough decision -- to avoid the temptation, in Thatcher's vivid phrase, to "go wobbly." <u>Leaders need the group to help steel their resolve</u>.[29] This suggests an amendment to the conventional view of what group processes promote good decision-making. To put it provocatively, perhaps the best kind of group to encourage good decision-making where what is needed is courage is exactly the kind the groupthink tradition finds most worrisome – a tightly knit in-group helping provide the leader resolve.[30]

The most-difficult decisions are not ones executives make all the time. But our unexpected result about the kinds of decisions these were raises an important question about the "more is better" prescription in the group decision-making literature.

We really can't do too much more than speculate here. Since our findings about decisions involving courage emerged unexpectedly from our interviews, we had no questions to explore them, and

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[29] A meta-analysis of correlates of ethical decision-making in business (Loe et al 2000: 199) showed "overwhelming support" for the "pervasive influence of peers" (Hannah <u>et</u> al 2011; see also Gino 2009; Mayer et al. 2013). Obviously, if the leader has a bad character, a supportive group will encourage that as well – a key message of the literature on unethical decision-making in organizations. And if the executive wants to do the right thing but the group is indifferent or opposed, the group won't help steel leader resolve.

[30] Some literature discussing potential benefits of groupthink (e.g., 't Hart et al. 1997) does note that groupthink-infested groups can provide leaders with "emotional support," but does not discuss this in the context of courage, but of issues that are difficult because of wrenching value tradeoffs or risks of catastrophe (such as nuclear war).

we suggest this as an important topic for future research. We theorize that successful executives must be able – to use a term from organizational design theory developed for different contexts (O'Reilly and Tushman 2008) – to be <u>ambidextrous</u> in decision processes they use. In most situations, they should follow vigilant decision-making, as the literature recommends. We note our outstanding executives seem somewhat more likely than controls to consult widely in the organization when making decisions, and use more techniques for encouraging dissent. But they also need to know when to crank back on consulting or eliciting dissent, or even to go it alone.

Our results provide slight evidence – though we emphasize our conclusions are speculative – that outstanding executives are able to display ambidexterity, having the resources to rely on introspection more than information for calls involving courage. Fully half the outstanding executives made their most-difficult decisions alone. Outstanding executives were more likely to gather information from written sources, which may provide the benefits of information to use for decisions emphasizing courage where the executive wishes to cut back on information search from a wide group of advisors. They are a bit less sanguine about careerists than controls; given that civil servants may counsel caution, not courage, having the confidence to tune nay-saying careerists out under certain circumstances may be an advantage. We also have limited evidence outstanding executives may have a more continuous group of advisors, perhaps willing to sacrifice some diversity for the benefits of an ongoing team, linked by closer ties and thus potentially able to provide moral as well as informational support.[31] Finally, outstanding executives are somewhat more likely to name their deputy secretary as a source of advice than controls; bosses may steel – or provide cover for – an executive who needs to make an unpopular decision.

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[31] Having a more continuous group of advisors may provide the best of both worlds, since research on the influence of minority opinions on the majority (Wood et al. 1994) establishes, consistent with self-categorization theory, that a minority opinion is more likely to influence the majority when it comes from somebody otherwise similar to the majority. This suggests a greater ability for minorities to be persuasive in ongoing decision teams. The ongoing nature of interactions among members increases the potential scope of what the literature calls "sleeper" effects, whereby minority influence makes itself more felt in later, similar decisions than in the original decision where a minority view was raised. Furthermore, an ongoing group is more likely to develop "transactive memory" (Wegner 1987), whereby different members of the group know what others are good at, reducing transaction costs for decision-making.

We are very hesitant to draw any conclusions based on the fact there were two outstanding executives (but no controls) who spontaneously responded to our question about people they consulted by saying they didn't consult very many. However, one might argue that as decisions requiring courage become more-important to an executive's agenda, the more-important an ability to crank down consultation might be: we note that one of these executives faced an environment where much of the job consisted of making decisions that were organizationally and politically controversial, while the other noted at several places in the interview the importance of ignoring controversy in making decisions.[32] It is also noteworthy how many executives, particularly outstanding ones, relied on consultations with hierarchical superiors in making decisions. Since superiors are further from the details of the decision than the executive's subordinates, they are less useful as a source of information; however, in the case of difficult decisions, they may be more a source of support and resolve (the less-generously inclined might characterize consultations with superiors as seeking "cover," but we take a more positive interpretation).

We cannot suggest any causal connection between the fact that outstanding executives were more likely than controls to define their most-difficult decision as one requiring courage, and the fact they were also judged by others to be outstanding. Instead, we theorize that a strong set of core beliefs and goals, along with a strong need for achievement (McClelland et al. 1953), are underlying factors associated with executive success. If true, then there may be a common variable that both helps executives to be successful and also makes it more likely their self-reported most-difficult decision involved doing courage: the argument would be that a higher commitment to core beliefs and to achievement are both associated with success and with placing executives in situations where they know what the right thing to do is and why it's important to do it (to achieve their goals), but where the choice

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[32] Talking about George Washington, about whom he had read a lot, the respondent noted that "if [Washington] listened to his critics, if his compass was such that that weather vane banked upon polling and public opinion, how could you run that army? And so sometimes it's like you just kind of have to take the position as, 'If you start to care more about what people think about you than your job in this town, you're going to start compromising your decisions.'"

is painful. Less-committed executives might not face these as their toughest decisions because they would be more inclined to respond to such conflicts by taking the easy way out.

Still, we argue that these executives' ability to make decisions requiring courage – and designing a process to help them make such decision – is related to their effectiveness. For them to be able to translate core values and need for achievement into success, they are likely to need make such decisions. A process that helps them with the resolve to do so will help them become successful.

"A Bias for Action"

Outstanding executives more than controls placed a value on decisiveness – displaying what Peters and Waterman (1982) call a "bias for action." The groupthink literature does recognize vigilant problem-solving may diminish decisiveness because it is "costly in taking up the precious time of already overburdened executives" (Janis 1982: 265). However, psychologically, gathering more information and deliberating more may be a way to avoid decisions, producing what is colloquially called "paralysis by analysis" (Langley 1995).

Decision avoidance is a fact of life. Notes Anderson (2003: 139): "The experience of postponing and avoiding certain choices is universal." It may occur for a number of reasons. If decisions are hard or painful, people may avoid them simply to avoid pain or in hopes the problem will solve itself. Psychologists have studied "omission bias" (Spranka et al. 1991; Anderson 2003), the bias in favor of not deciding over deciding, which seems to occur because people become more upset[33] about a decision (commission) that turns out badly than about a non-decision (omission) that does so. In government, this is strengthened, because punishment for mistakes is often stronger than reward for success. Furthermore, legal requirements to explain and justify many government decisions help create a culture where exhaustive information-gathering and deliberation are favored over speed and finality. Finally, at any given level of an activity's effort or unpleasantness, some people just procrastinate more than others.

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[33] Ex ante they feel what psychologists call "anticipatory regret."

What do we make of the fact that outstanding executives seem more likely than controls to value decisiveness? It may just be that people with strong core values and a need for achievement both have a bias for action and also become successful. [34] But the ability to execute on a bias for action may serve as a mediating variable between being driven to make things better and actually succeeding. This too has implications for the "more is better" view. Executing a bias for action also requires character, since avoiding decisions is easier than making them, so helping a leader with resolve to decide can be important. Thus, the same argument for moral support applies. Furthermore, if a bias for action is one technique to implement a need for achievement, this suggests the relationship between quantity of information-gathering and success does not have a linear upward slope, but may take the form of an inverted U (Grant 2011). Up to a point, more information search helps, but past there, losses from non-decisions or delay may make success less likely.

The Importance of Character for Other Attributes of Outstanding Executives

There were few differences between outstanding executives and controls regarding leadership competencies they cited as most important, but those few were significant. Both groups identified such things as the ability to listen, negotiating skills, and substantive expertise as important leadership qualities. However, in addition to difference (noted earlier) in citing decisiveness as a critical competency, four outstanding executives (no controls) identified "focus/ability to prioritize," and three (only one control) did the same for "having a vision." And even though we asked no questions regarding organizational change, six outstanding executives (only three controls) brought up the need to drive change in various parts of the interviews.[35]

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[34] An executive driven to make things better will likely have a bias for action, since by definition inaction means accepting the status quo. Note that it might be argued a bias for action favors activist government and thus is ideologically controversial. However, that many of the most-difficult decisions the executives discussed, which might have been easier to avoid, involved program cutbacks.

[35] It is plausible to believe a reason for the somewhat lower enthusiasm of outstanding executives regarding civil servants related to a perception they were less-enthusiastic about their change agenda.

Character is important for all these. To focus -- against temptations to skate from one interesting project to another -- and to articulate a vision on an ongoing basis -- rather than just doing one's job -- both require character. Much literature on leading change emphasizes the importance of consultation and participation, but we suggest there is also a character element to engaging in a change effort, because leading for change is more difficult than administering the status quo – like decision avoidance, the latter is the easy way out. So getting support that steels an executive's resolve is important here as well.

<u>Implications for Research and Practice</u>

Despite limitations due to limited sample size and inability to observe actual decision making, we believe we have uncovered interesting patterns and topics for further research. Our findings present perhaps a more positive view of the extent to which senior U.S. federal executives are "vigilant" in making decisions. The groupthink literature has focused primarily on foreign-policy decisions, which are more insulated from transparency demands, questioning by third parties, and legal requirements (such as the Administrative Procedures Act) than those made by executives we studied. We have also drawn attention to the design of differentiated decision-making processes where the leader must deal with issues of courage rather than complexity. Researchers and practitioners need to learn more about how executives discern between the two, as well as how they can acquire and apply decision-making competencies (individual as well as group) successfully to deal with both.

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APPENDIX:
CLOSED-ENDED QUESTIONS ON DECISION-MAKING STYLE AND RELATIONS WITH CIVIL SERVANTS

<u>Decision-making style</u>: These questions presented two alternatives at points 1 and 10 on a scale, and asked respondent to locate themselves on the scale:

Point 1: "If I have a meeting to discuss and important decision, generally most of those in attendance are my most-trusted staff, who can discuss with me arguments for different courses of action."
Point 10: "If I have a meeting to discuss and important decision, generally I bring in representatives of people in the organization with different points of view, so I can hear them discuss their opinions."

Point 1: "I prefer to get a great deal of information before making an important decision, even at the risk of 'paralysis by analysis.'"
Point 10; "I prefer to be decisive in making an important decision, even at the risk of making the decision without enough information."

<u>Relations with Civil Servants</u>

(INFORMATION PROVISION)

1. Senior career civil servants often raise points about the issues I am considering that I would never have thought about myself.

2. When a senior civil servant raises an objection to something I am considering, the objection almost always has merit, even if I end up not accepting the objection.

(CANDOR)

1. The senior civil servants with whom I work generally give me their unvarnished views, even they are contrary to my own.

2. I feel I can almost always trust the advice given me by senior career civil servants with whom I deal.

(WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE)

1. In general, the senior career civil servants with whom I work are not willing enough to consider changes in the ways we have always done things.

(LOYALTY)

1. The senior civil servants with whom I work generally will fully support a decision I've made, even if it's contrary to their advice.

2. The senior civil servants with whom I work generally work hard to carry out administration initiatives and priorities.

TABLE ONE: PEOPLE CONSULTED FOR IMPORTANT DECISIONS

	Outstanding executives	Controls
Direct reports	7	7
Personal staff	4	3
Other subordinates	2	3
Internal experts	1	1
Hierarchical superiors	6	4
Peers within department	5	4
Peers outside organization (but inside government)	2	3
External advisors	2	4
Congress	2	3
OMB/White House	2	2

TABLE TWO: SOURCES OF INFORMATION OTHER THAN SPECIFIC INDIVIDUALS

	Outstanding Executives	Controls
WRITTEN SOURCES		
General media/daily press	4	2
Trade press	4	3
Websites/Google	4	2
Reading incoming emails	2	0
Outside datasets/statistics	0	1
Books	1	0
OUTSIDE EXPERTS/ACADEMICS	4	1
ORAL SOURCES		
Outside organizations/interest groups	4	4
Customers	1	2
Frontline employees	1	0
Employee union	1	0

TABLE THREE: MEAN RESPONSES TO CLOSED-ENDED QUESTIONS ON RELATIONS WITH CIVIL SERVANTS

	Outstanding executives(*)	Controls(*)	Careerists(**)
Information1	1.3	1.4	2.4
Information2	1.4	1.4	1.7
Candor1	2.0	1.2	2.1
Candor2	1.3	1.1	2.1
Willingness to change	3.6	4.4	4.0
Loyalty1	2.3	1.1	1.7
Loyalty2	1.4	1.0	1.6

(*) Only executives who themselves are political appointees

(**) Executives from both groups who are career civil servants in their position

For question wordings, see Appendix. In all cases but the "willingness to change" question, a lower value represents more confidence in civil servants.

TABLE FOUR: WHY WAS "MOST-DIFFICULT" DECISION DIFFICULT

	Outstanding executives	Controls
Unpopular inside organization	5	1
Unpopular/controversial politically (with organized groups, public, Congress, White House)	1	4
Had emotionally wrenching personal impact for staff/specific individuals in the organization	4	1
Complex issues/hard value tradeoffs/had to think in new ways	0	4